

## Hanging In with Sharon Olds

by Judy Swann

At the beginning of the last century, when poets decided they'd had enough of the Edwardians, the classical canon, and formalism, modernism was born. It was an anti-movement. In the course of the 20th century, greater and greater liberties were taken with the new "free verse" until almost any well-written thing qualified as a poetic genre: manifestos, diary-entries, zaum ("transreason"), tone poems, L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry, and so on. Poetry was energized, engaging, masculine. So when we consider Sharon Olds, Poet Laureate for the State of New York 1998-2000, we are angry when her award-winning, accessible, witty, and plainly crafted poems about family life and erotic pleasure are decried by critics as "programmatically unfeminine sexual bravado."

Although femininity is a man-made concept that has essentially nothing to do with femaleness, the concept of femininity does still matter in the same sad way (and often to the same sad folks) that it matters whether or not one believes in God, owns a television set, or accepts corporate personhood. Olds's intensely intimate and positive, life-affirming examination of her own birth, her children, sex, her children's pets, menstruation, sex, weddings, death, sex, parenthood, birth control, and, well, sex has left her detractors asking, "Is it art, this womanly, affirmative avalanche of confidences?" Ezra Pound said, "The essential thing in a poet is that he [sic] builds us his [sic] world." Is it enough to change the gender of the pronouns and consider Olds a poet in compliance with Pound's

terminology? Or must Olds report a man's world? (That this question still erupts in 2007 is appalling.)

It's true that Olds's palette of devices and tropes is select, almost severely childlike. Like one of the Wyeths, or that darling of the New York School, Jane Freilicher, about whom David Lehman writes that she was "determined to let order emerge from a faithful rendering of a scene," Olds depicts the milestones of family life without meter, without icti, arses, and theses, devoid of ellipsis, aposiopesis, pleonasm, zeugma, hendiadys and litotes. And yet it is still verse. We do not require the classical figures in verse, have not for a century. Of the classical figures, we find in Olds pretty much what we see in her contemporaries: metaphor, synecdoche. Take this poem, one selected by Garrison Keillor for his anthology of great verse:

*Topography*

After we flew across the country we  
got into bed, laid our bodies  
delicately together, like maps laid  
face to face, East to West, my  
San Francisco against your New York, your  
Fire Island against my Sonoma, my  
New Orleans deep in your Texas, your Idaho  
bright on my Great Lakes, my Kansas  
burning against your Kansas your Kansas  
burning against my Kansas, your Eastern  
Standard Time pressing into my  
Pacific Time, my Mountain Time  
beating against your Central Time, your  
sun rising swiftly from the right my  
sun rising swiftly from the left your  
moon rising slowly from the left my  
moon rising slowly from the right until  
all four bodies of the sky

burn above us, sealing us together,  
all our cities twin cities,  
all our states united, one  
nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

*Topography* has such a happy sense of humor, we almost don't recognize it as modern. It lacks the cynicism and ugliness of modernism. In terms of tropes, perhaps the conflation of sexual bliss and patriotism is an oxymoron, perhaps not.

Instead of the classical trope anacoluthon (the technique of altering the scheme of a sentence in the course of the sentence itself) Olds gives us embedded parentheticals, phrases in apposition, interspersions of imagery. Many modern poets do this—it's a stream of consciousness technique. In one place she says:

When we're lying heaped together then,  
*jetsam, high tide line*, sometimes I'll murmur

In another:

waiting for her to turn,  
*like a cherub*, and nurse

And another:

When the doctor see another spot,  
*maybe malignant*, on my mother's face

And another, a double instance:

When I first stand up to my mother, *when I am  
fifty—and on a civic issue—*  
she changes

(all italics mine)

Because we are a nation that no longer rhymes, our poets play with assonance and the semi-subconscious harmony of sounds, Olds among them. Take this, from "The Pope's Penis":

#### The Pope's Penis

It hangs deep in his robes, a delicate  
clapper at the center of a bell.  
It moves when he moves, a ghostly fish in a  
halo of silver seaweed, the hair  
swaying in the dark and the heat -- and at night,  
while his eyes sleep, it stands up  
in praise of God.

This piece begins as a study in labials and plosives: pope's, penis, deep, robes, clapper, bell. moves. It ends in a hallelujah: halo, hair, swaying, stands, up, praise. To disparage the blasphemy is trite, because irreverence is all that can save us. One of Olds's critics objects that she talks too much about sex. He says he cannot bear to hear another word about any of her orifices. He finds Olds's themes to be too few. He finds her enduring focus on sexuality to be evidence that she does not develop, does not grow.

Of course, this critic is not really championing growth, he is asking to be spared any further insight into the poet's sexuality. This kind of criticism is analogous to a Biblical scholar criticizing the psalmist for his limited themes: praise, smite the enemy, glorify God, protect the psalmist, destroy the enemy, comfort the psalmist by blotting out the enemy, etc. There are more than 150 psalms, all on these themes. I personally would have liked to read the psalmist's depiction of sexual satiety, but it was simply not in his palette.

Another technique commonly found in an Olds poem is the interleaving of conversational snippets:

... —and it *BREAKS*  
*my HEART*, she cries out

---

...*I think*  
*we did it this time*, I whispered, *I think*  
*we're joined at the hip*. He has a smile  
from the heart; at this hour, I live in its light.  
I gnaw very softly on his jaw, *Would you want me to*  
*eat you, in the Andes, in a plane crash*, I murmur,  
*to survive? Yes*. We smile. He asks,  
*Would you want me to eat you to survive? I would love it*,  
I cry out.

---

After he petted his mouse awhile,  
our son said "*He's really still,*  
*he doesn't move at all,*" ...

(some italics Olds's)

Feminism, especially radical feminism, is an affirmation that our original births are enough. There is no mythical model for our original births, there cannot be, they are too uniquely numerous. As Mircea Eliade notes, occurrences that lack a mythical model are profane, unreal, dismissible (for the confirmed anti-feminist, anyway). So when Olds writes of her first hour on earth, her original re-thinking of this event strikes a chord with the reader:

*My First Hour*

That hour, I was most myself. I had shrugged

my mother slowly off, I lay there  
taking my first breaths, as if  
the air of the room was blowing me  
like a bubble. All I had to do  
was go out along the line of my gaze and back,  
feeling gravity, silk, the  
pressure of the air a caress, smelling on  
myself her creamy blood. The air  
was softly touching my skin and mouth,  
entering me and drawing forth the little  
sighs I did not know as mine.  
I was not afraid. I lay in the quiet  
and looked, and did the wordless thought,  
my mind was getting its oxygen  
direct, the rich mix by mouth.  
I hated no one. I gazed and gazed,  
and everything was interesting, I was  
free, not yet in love, I did not  
belong to anyone, I had drunk  
no milk yet--no one had  
my heart. I was not very human. I did not  
know there was anyone else. I lay  
like a god, for an hour, then they came for me  
and took me to my mother.

Furthermore, although Olds is not very concerned with the "Not War" part of the famous slogan, she wants to be sure we hear the "Make Love" in her message. This privileging of passion, in fact the replacement of religion by erotica, is a theme to which Olds returns again and again, most often successfully. The following four excerpts took about one minute to find, so frequently does she treat of the sexual:

Then we entered a time of passion so  
extreme it was almost calm...

---

while I take you as if  
consuming you while you take me as if  
consuming me

---

Your front seat had an overpowering  
male smell, as if the chrome had been  
rubbed with jism, a sharp stale  
delirious odor like the sour plated  
taste of the patina on an old watch,

---

I lay on my back after making love  
breasts white in shallow curves like the lids of soup dishes

and sometimes less so:

...sex had been  
like music, high and bright as the moon

and in more than one poem she forces us to remember that the sex act can be  
brutal and unholy, criminal, rape:

they lay like pulled-up roots at his feet,  
two naked 12-year old girls

It's hard for me to move back to her sunnier work from the dark place of her rape  
poems, and I think it is hard for Olds, too. This is where she uses irony to round-  
trip the horror:

She knows  
what all of us want never to know  
and she does a cartwheel, the splits, she shakes the  
shredded pom-poms in her fists

One poem that both uses irony *and* consistently elicits happy laughter from  
audiences is her prose poem "The Solution." Written in the late 80's, it predates  
the emergence of the online dating services that exist today. The grammar of

actual personal ads, conscribed as they are by the perception that the writers are pathetic or of low social status, reveals a world where participants agree to one of five primary identities: men seeking women, men seeking men, women seeking men, women seeking women, and other. Olds, of course, transcends all that:

### The Solution

Finally they got the Singles problem under control, they made it scientific. They opened huge Sex Centers-you could simply go and state what you want and they would find you someone who wanted that too. You would stand under a sign saying I Like to Be Touched and Held and when someone came and stood under the sign saying I Like to Touch and Hold they would send the two of you off together.

At first it went great. A steady stream of people under the sign I Like to Give Pain paired up with a steady stream of people from under I Like to Receive Pain. Foreplay Only-No Orgasm found its adherents, and Orgasm Only-No Foreplay matched up its believers. A loyal Berkeley, California, policeman stood under the sign Married Adults, Lights Out, Face to Face, Under a Sheet, because that's the only way it was legal in Berkeley-but he stood there a long time in his lonely blue law coat. And the man under I Like to Be Sung to White Bread Is Kneaded on My Stomach had been there weeks without a reply.

Things began to get strange. The Love Only-No Sex was doing fine; the Sex Only-No Love was doing well, pair after pair walking out together like wooden animals off a child's ark, but the line for 38D or Bigger was getting unruly, shouting insults at the line for 8 Inches or Longer, and odd isolated signs were springing up everywhere, Retired Schoolteacher and Parakeet-No Leather; One Rm/No Bath/View of Sausage Factory.

The din rose in the vast room. The line under I Want to Be Fucked Senseless was so long that portable toilets had to be added and a minister brought for deaths, births, and marriages on the line. Over under I Want to Fuck Senseless-no one, a pile of guns. A hollow roaring filled the enormous gym. More and more people began to move over to Want to Be Fucked Senseless. The line snaked around the gym, the stadium, the whole town, out into the fields. More and more people joined it, until Fucked Senseless stretched across the nation in a huge wide belt like the

Milky Way, and since they had to name it they named it, they called it the American Way.

**Judy Swann** is a poet, novelist, essayist, copy editor, designer, illustrator, reader, translator, and webmaster. Once she had 14 apartments in a single year, but now she has lived for almost 13 years in the same small blue house (looks like Frieda Kahlo's *casa azul*) with city park on two sides. Someday she hopes either to retire to a utopian goat-farm in Missouri or to sail around the world, going from port to port in a 30-something foot boat.

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